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Stereotypes, Intersectionality, and Bisexuality Within “*Jane The Virgin*”

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Abstract

For this project I have looked at the show *Jane the Virgin* through a critical lens, and analyzed the characters in the show, the stereotypes portrayed about Latino culture, the stereotypes towards bisexuality, how intersectionality is involved, and the Bechdel-Wallace test.

Throughout this paper I will examine a few specific characters and look at how stereotypes, of certain kinds, are portrayed, and how others are completely turned on it's head. I apply terms such as intersectionality, stereotype, and sexuality to the characters and what they go through, throughout the course of the show. I have found that there are a few characters that represent the bi-sexual community, others from the LGBTQIA++ community, and discuss how they are shown positively in the show. I also use a critical cultural lens and look at common stereotypes that are made about the Latino culture, and how this show applies many of them, but also shows characters fighting those stereotypes and proving that not everyone from this culture fits those assumptions.

Keywords: Telenovela, Intersectionality, Stereotypes, Bechdel-Wallace Test

Stereotypes, Intersectionality, And Bi-Sexuality

Within Jane The Virgin

The focus of this paper is on the popular television show, *Jane The Virgin*. This show came out in 2014 and is an Americanized version of the telenovela, *Juana la Virgen*, from Venezuela. The show focuses on a 23-year-old graduate student, Jane Gloriana Villanueva, who is extremely focused on her goal of becoming a teacher and a writer. She is accidentally, artificially inseminated with a man's sperm. That man turns out to be her rich, hotel-owning, millionaire boss, Rafael Solano. He is married to Petra Solano, real name is Natalia, who moved from the Czech Republic to escape from her psychotic ex-fiancé. Jane also happens to be in a serious relationship with Michael Cordero, a police officer, and they have plans to get married. Oh, did I mention that Jane is a virgin? So now we have a pregnant virgin who ends up caught in a love triangle between Rafael and Michael throughout the show. Jane is raised in a household of strong Latina women. Her abuela (grandmother) is religiously Catholic and helps guide Jane throughout the show to do the right thing. Jane follows in her abuela's footsteps and has always been religious as well. Her abuela, Alba, is the one who encouraged Jane to save herself for marriage. Jane's mother, Xiomara, had Jane when she was 17, and is not very religious at all. She loves to date around and has no problem being promiscuous, flirty, and dressing provocatively. I look at this show with a critical cultural lens, and analyze the characters in the show, the stereotypes that are carried out concerning the Latino culture, the stereotypes that are broken, bisexuality within the show, intersectionality, and the use of the Bechdel-Wallace Test.

What is a telenovela, you may ask? A telenovela is something that came from Latino culture and is "a serialized form of television melodrama, usually centered on the romantic

misfortunes of a heterosexual couple, which always comes to a narrative conclusion” (Avila-Saavedra, 2010, p.134). In telenovelas, everything is dramatic. The people, the events, the problems, the love affairs, everything. Telenovelas sometimes portray Latinos in stereotypical roles. A lot of the time they either play criminals, the comic fool, the overly romanticized and sexualized lover, or the one in poverty. In this show there are some stereotypical characteristics implemented by Jane’s family and some other characters, but many bad stereotypes made about Latinos are broken. This leads into my next topic, reviewing the stereotypes throughout the show.

When discussing stereotypes, I would like to analyze a few of the ones present in the show. First, I will look into Family, then I will analyze, Immigrant Status, Economic Class Differences and Money, and finally Religion and Sexuality. Family is generally important to most people. In Latino culture, a common stereotype is the high level of importance of family. In this show, the Villanueva women value family as one of their top priorities. Throughout all of the seasons of this show, there are many times that Jane or another character is forced to choose between family and something else important to them. Every single time there is a fork in the road, and they have to pick one or the other, family is always chosen. No matter how deserving that family member is, family always wins. In the beginning, when Jane is artificially inseminated and ends up being pregnant, she has to decide if she wants to keep the baby or have an abortion. While there were some conflicting thoughts, she ends up deciding to have the baby, because no matter what, he is her family, he is a part of her. Many times Jane is also asked to choose between family and her career, which is hard for her but never fails to choose family. While the importance of family is present in the Villanueva family, it is also present in Petra’s family. Petra’s mother, Magda, came over with her from the Czech Republic. Magda is not the

nicest, or most giving, or caring person to Petra, but Petra stays by her side. Throughout the show Magda does some very questionable and horrible things, yet Petra's loyalty doesn't waver. Magda constantly lies to everyone, including Petra, and murders many others, and still Petra covers for her, and remains by her mother's side. The idea is, family over everything.

Another stereotype assumed about Latinos is that all of them are immigrants, and they are stealing our jobs, are lazy, non-educated, non-English speaking, people. This show incorporates this stereotype by completely breaking it and proving that this is a horrible assumption. Alba, Jane's abuela, came to America illegally in the 1970s, 41 years before. Throughout the show, Alba is shown at different times, struggling because she is undocumented. She has not applied for citizenship because she is afraid if she gets denied, the government will send her back to Venezuela without her family. While Alba may be an immigrant, she came to America with a college degree, and was a certified nurse back in Venezuela. There is a moment in the show where Alba is asked by her boss, if she even got through middle school, and is extremely shocked when Alba tells her about her high education and certifications as a nurse. This shows that her boss pursued the stereotype about Latinos assuming Alba to be un-educated. In the beginning of the show, Alba is only shown speaking Spanish. However, it also shows Jane and Xiomara speaking to her in English. There are many times in this series, where people assume Alba only speaks Spanish, and say things about her, as if she doesn't understand. The thing is, Alba speaks English and understands it perfectly, she just prefers to speak Spanish. The assumption that Alba only speaks and understands Spanish, is another stereotype about Latinos. There is a moment in the show where Alba has an accident and falls down the stairs. She is immediately taken to the hospital, but the doctor says he is unable to treat her because she is undocumented and illegal and therefore does not have insurance. This scares Jane and her

mother, because the doctor said he has to call immigration services and have Alba deported. Michael, Jane's fiancé, ends up making sure that doesn't happen, but the family is still worried. After this incident, Alba applies for her green card. The family spends months waiting for the news, still worried and anxious. Finally, after a long wait, Alba receives her green card. This process is important because it shows what people today have to go through and the current political and immigrant events happening currently. In the show, Alba has a few jobs, and she is always a hard worker, on time, and puts everything into her job. This breaks the stereotype made about laziness.

The next stereotype I would like to analyze is economic class differences and money. A common assumption about Latinos is that they come from poverty, can only get low paying jobs, do not have money, and are not able to own a house. The Villanueva women all have jobs. Jane works as a waitress at a fancy hotel while putting herself through grad school, Xiomara pursues her dream as a singer/dancer in restaurants, and Alba is a retired nurse, and works in the hotel giftshop. These jobs can be perceived as lower paying, which might give people the idea that this stereotype is true, however it is not. Rafael, the baby's father, is the owner of the expensive hotel that Jane and Alba work at. He is in fact, Latino, and has a very high-status job, is a millionaire, and does not have to worry about money. Jane's father, Rogelio, is a very famous actor on a telenovela called *The Passions of Santos* and is extremely wealthy as well. This shows a variety of Latino people having low status jobs, high status jobs, and the differences between them. This show has many Latino characters who are shown in a variety of different jobs, high paying and low paying. This breaks the stereotype that Latinos cannot be wealthy and can only have low status jobs.

The last stereotype I would like to bring up is Religion and Sexuality. Religion being an important aspect of Latino life, specifically Catholicism is a stereotype. The Villanueva women have differing values of religion in their household. Alba, being the most religious, is constantly shown praying with her rosary beads, guiding others while quoting the Bible, implementing lessons into her family's life and relating them back to God, and most importantly, strongly encouraging Jane to save her virginity for marriage. Jane follows in her abuela's footsteps, and ever since she was a young girl, practices Catholicism with her abuela. While she may not be as strict with religion as her grandmother, she still values it and lives her life with religion as a guide. Xiomara, unlike her mother, loosely follows the religion. She is shown a few times, praying when something goes wrong, and will occasionally talk to God, but for the most part lives a life of partying, casual dating and sex, and following her passions. Rafael and his family, however, are not religious at all. It is not something that is of high value to him. This shows the contrast in religious beliefs between Latino characters and proves that this stereotype is not always true. In the show, Alba is shown with a young Jane, and is teaching her to compare her virginity to a flower. She tells Jane to crumple the flower up, and then try to make it look new again. Jane cannot make it look the same. Alba tells her that this is what happens to your virginity, and she must wait until marriage to have sex. Jane is horrified and decides to trust her abuela and takes a vow of chastity. She hangs an uncrushed flower in a frame in her room, as a constant reminder to continue her chastity promise. Throughout the show, Jane's mother is constantly telling Jane that it is okay to have sex and encourages her to explore her sexuality. Speaking of sexuality, I would like to move on to my next topic, which is exploring bisexuality and intersectionality within the show.

What is bi-sexuality? Robyn Ochs defines bisexuality as “an umbrella term for people who recognize and honor their potential for sexual and emotional attraction to more than one gender” (Ochs, 2015). In this show, there are a few characters that come out as bi-sexual, gay, or straight characters explore their sexuality. In most telenovelas and in Hispanic movies, shows, and other media, the LGBTQIA++ community is usually underrepresented, or misrepresented. Characters identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual are usually shown hiding their identity, feelings guilty, not being accepted by their loved ones or the community around them, and overly exaggerated. In this show, the writers chose to bring in characters that question the heteronormative roles in Hispanic telenovelas. I am going to mention two in particular, though there are several characters who are from the LGBTQIA++ community. Adam, Jane’s first love, before Michael, reveals to Jane after their second try at their relationship, that he is bisexual. Before he admits this to her, Jane hears him talking to a friend about his ex in a picture. When Jane sees the picture, she automatically assumes he dated the woman standing next to two men, in the photo. When she confronts Adam about it, he corrects her and says he actually dated one of the men in the photo. He reveals that he is bisexual to Jane, and she is shocked. This is an example of heteronormativity. The Merriam-Webster website defines heteronormativity as “of, relating to, or based on the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality” (Merriam-Webster, 1991). When Jane assumed that Adam was straight, and so was his past, that was her practicing heteronormativity. After Adam told Jane, she was freaked out. Jane brought up some stereotypical questions about having to worry about men and women around Adam, and if being bi-sexual is just a stop before becoming gay. Adam answered all of Jane’s questions nicely and encouraged Jane to explore her sexuality with an open mind. This was hard for her especially because of her religion. Jane tried to keep an open mind, and actually

attempted to kiss Lina. This shows characters breaking out of the sexual norm boxes they are in. Petra, in episode 74, comes out as bisexual. She was married to Rafael, they got divorced, and were on again off again. She dated other men, and then fell for her female lawyer. When Petra came out, she was immediately accepted, and not questioned or made to feel uncomfortable. Jane did not react the same way she did with Adam, which shows the differences between men and women coming out, and how they are perceived. I would like to incorporate intersectionality into Petra's role in the show as well. Intersectionality is defined by Ahir Gopaldas as "the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression" (Gopaldas, 2013, p.90). Petra came to America from the Czech Republic, and once she arrived, she had to adapt to American standards in order to fit in here. In the Czech Republic, Petra was very poor and had to steal and beg for money. When she came to America, she married rich, and her economic status changed entirely. Petra lost her accent and style to adapt to the ways in America. She is lucky in some ways because she is very light skinned, and being a foreigner trying to fit in, in America, is very hard. Her light skin and looks helped her fit in easily and could adapt to western beauty standards fairly quickly. When she came to America she was also in a heterosexual relationship at the time, so things weren't hard for her. Once Petra came out as bisexual, things could have changed, but they didn't. Her light skin, economic status, and the fact that she identifies as a woman, made this easy, while people of color, low economic status, or being male could have harder time being accepted.

In this last section of my paper I would like to discuss the use of the Bechdel-Wallace Test in this show. Throughout the show, Jane is writing a novel. In grad school, she has an advisor who is there to help her with her writing. Jane has always loved telenovelas and watches

them almost religiously with her mother and abuela on the daily. She is a hopeless romantic, and most of her writing is focused on the genre of romance. As she works on her novel, her advisor is not interested in her novel, because of its genre. She is not a fan of romance and everything that goes with it. Every time Jane brings her work in to get feedback, her advisor is displeased. Finally, Jane asks why. Her advisor tells her she would like her novel to pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test. The Bechdel-Wallace Test is “a sequence of three questions designed to assess the presence of women in movies” (Agarwal et al, 2015, p.830). While it states that this applies to movies, this test is also used in books, television shows, and other media. The three questions used to determine if something passes the Bechdel-Wallace Test, are as follows, “(T1) are there at least two named women in the movie? (T2) do these women talk to each other? And (T3) do these women talk to each other about something besides a man?” (Agarwal et al, 2015, p.830). Jane re-evaluates her novel, and changes things up a bit. Most telenovelas are centered around a male love interest, a damsel in distress, and such. Jane changed her book so that she could incorporate things other than women talking about their love for a man, but still was able to capture romance. *Jane The Virgin*, as a show, also passes the Bechdel-Wallace Test as well. While the show focuses a lot on Jane and her love triangle between Michael, Rafael, and herself, the show also focuses on her career, her family, religion, immigration, stereotypes, school, and many other things.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the stereotypes about Latinos, breaking stereotypes, bisexuality, intersectionality, and the Bechdel-Wallace Test. While there were some stereotypes in the show that were carried out, there was also a lot that were broken and proved those stereotypes to be wrong assumptions. I discussed bisexuality and its role in telenovelas, and in this show in particular. I incorporated the use of intersectionality into some of the characters, and the role of that in the show as well. I applied the Bechdel-Wallace Test to the show itself, and it passed. The Bechdel-Wallace Test was also used within the content of the show, and I thought it was important to mention. Overall, I analyzed many things in the Americanized version of the telenovela, *Jane The Virgin*, and I hope you are able to make the connections as well, as you watch the show.

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